Gaddafi, other leaders had almost $1 billion in Swiss banks

By James V. Grimaldi, Monday, May 6, 6:06 PM

Swiss authorities announced on Monday that banks in their country had located almost $1 billion in assets of Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi and the former presidents of Egypt and Tunisia.

Financial regulators in Switzerland had identified in Swiss banks assets worth almost $416 million that may belong to the embattled Libyan leader or the government; $474 million that is linked to former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak; and $69 million belonging to Tunisia’s fallen leader Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

The announcement was made by Swiss President and Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey at a diplomatic meeting in the Tunisian capital Tunis and confirmed for the Washington Post by a Swiss foreign ministry spokesman.

Switzerland, long considered a haven for stolen assets of autocrats, has worked to combat that reputation and last year passed an aggressive new law to give the government power to seize and repatriate stolen assets.

This year, the Swiss government has moved quickly to freeze assets, Calmy-Rey wrote in an Op-Ed piece published in European newspapers. She said that five days after the revolt in Tunisia toppled Ben Ali, officials ordered banks to freeze assets of Ben Ali and his family. Thirty minutes after Mubarak announced he was stepping down, Swiss authorities froze his assets. And when forces loyal to Gaddafi started bombing his own people, the Swiss ordered institutions to block all Libyan money.

Calmy-Rey said, repeating a comment she said she heard from a international finance specialist.
“The idea of Switzerland as a safe haven for stolen funds belongs to the past, and, if at all, is best left to crime thrillers,” Calmy-Rey said, repeating a comment she had heard from an international finance specialist. “No other country has even come close to restituting as much money derived from illegal activities to the countries of origin as Switzerland.”

Swiss authorities told The Washington Post last week that the orders to freeze Mubarak’s assets had been followed by a request from the new ruling officials in Egypt to return the money. The Swiss said the first request had lacked sufficient information and they sent it back seeking more details.

The Swiss Justice Department invited Egyptian authorities to “explain on the basis of concrete examples which offenses Hosni Mubarak and others shall have committed,” said department spokesman Folco Galli.

Switzerland has ordered financial institutions to block the accounts containing assets that can be traced to or belong to Gaddafi, Mubarak and Ben Ali. The accounts remain frozen until the countries claiming the assets are able to provide legal document supporting their claim to the money.